DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 578 CS 214 692

AUTHOR Helmers, Marguerite
TITLE Touring the City: College Sophomores Address Homelessness with Orwell.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (84th, Orlando, FL, November 16-21, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Sophomores; Critical Thinking; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Homeless People; Introductory Courses; *Literature Appreciation; *Political Issues; *Social Action
IDENTIFIERS Orwell (George)

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, university-level general education courses in English focus on the appreciation of literature. A fundamental premise of this approach is that literate people enjoy reading because they can talk about books with friends, which makes the classroom a sort of modern-day coffee house. Contributing to this pedagogical philosophy is the conviction that the general education course provides students with their last chance to read important works. Despite the efforts of one instructor to give a political dimension to an introductory literature course, students remained passive spectators of literary art. Apparently, they were assured that they might comfortably remain observers of past cultures and non-participants in important debates. The poetical and political impulses established in the course were not congruent and actually instituted conflicting pedagogical aims: the poetical reinforced a passive, appreciative mode, while the political demanded engagement with provocative questions. Responses to an essay question showed passive responses to social problems such as the homelessness investigated in George Orwell's "Down and Out in Paris and London." It is clear that the problems with those responses resulted from the course's own conflicted trajectory: what began as a course in intellectual spectatorship ended with a call for social action. There are, however, other more productive ways to unite the poetical and political; the two, for instance, can be contrasted in a study of British identity. (TB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

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Marguerite Helmers
Department of English
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh 54901

Touring the City: College Sophomores Address Homelessness With Orwell

Traditionally, university-level general education courses in English have made students read as much literature as possible in fourteen or sixteen weeks. After reading, talk might turn to literary structure or literary themes, but the primary goal of the course would be appreciation. A fundamental premise of this approach is that literate people enjoy reading because they can talk about books with friends, which makes the classroom a sort of modern coffee house, with cappucino replaced by the far less romantic can of Mountain Dew. Contributing to this pedagogical philosophy is the conviction that the general education course provides students with their last chance to read important works of literature.

There are also two less palatable assumptions buried in this exposure and enlightenment philosophy: one, that the students have entered the university in a state of deprivation from high school, having failed to read certain major works of literature (or literature at all, or even to have read at all); and two, that an individual instructor's choice of books for a semester does in fact constitute <u>important</u> reading. Thus, the exposure and enlightenment philosophy is a pedagogy of despair because it assumes that students come to the university inadequately prepared and will leave to stagnate in a philistine life.

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The appreciative, exposure and enlightenment philosophy has informed multiple sections of general education courses in modern literatures at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, where Marguerite Helmers teaches. Instructors create their own reading lists, and a glance at the various syllabi reveal varied conceptions of what is modern or important in literature. All syllabi share one attribute, though: comprehensiveness. Clearly, instructors believe that these three credits of general education literature are a last chance garage on the road of life.

This essay begins to explore what happens when a novel with political aims appears on the reading list in an appreciative course. Published in 1933, Down and Out in Paris and London is George Orwell's semi-autobiographical account of a nameless, journalistically-inclined narrator's experiences among the lowest classes in Paris and London. The narrator's self-enforced dislocation from England to Paris results in his acute participation in the plight of the frequently unemployed. He eventually leaves Paris to tramp through London streets seeking shelter and food. Unlike most of those among whom he found himself, however, the narrator reserved the option of returning to intellectual middle-class life. We suspend our disbelief as we read the novel and refuse to question how Orwell's narrator is actually writing to us throughout the book; he tacitly acknowledges that he has access to publishers and an audience. This stance makes Down and Out in Paris and London particularly

privileged commentary on the conditions of poverty and homelessness and should encourage students to critique claims of knowledge about people from different social strata.

Yet, early meetings of Marguerite Helmers' course on modern British literature seemed to have the opposite effect: students were apparently assured that they might comfortably remain spectators of past cultures and non-participants in important debates. In order to contextualize discussions of British literature, the first class session featured slides of England, including picturesque scenes of cobbled streets, bunches of flowers spilling from window boxes, and willow boughs descending heavily into glassy streams. The presentation emphasized the relationship between the historical consciousness represented in several of the novels on the reading list and the historical layering of the British landscape--ancient and significant stones resting a few yards from Victorian cottages, for example.

During the same class meeting, however, the students were given a map showing the extent of British territorial holdings in the year 1914. This map was intended to illuminate the political background to Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Forster's A Passage to India, and Orwell's Down and Out. Historical consciousness is absent in these works. Conrad and Orwell's characters in particular confront immediate social concerns: poverty, economic subjection, identity. The three political novels books were selected to encourage students to think about colonial relationships, to enter debates that dealt with the

representation of presumably exotic others and to consider the implications of the British government's territorial control in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The poetical and political impulses established in the course were not congruent and actually instituted conflicting pedagogical aims: the poetical reinforced a passive, appreciative mode, while the political demanded engagement with provocative questions. The position of appreciative spectator was more accessible to the students because it made so few demands on them. It actually forced the students to become spectators of the political conflicts in the novels. This distressing consequence became evident in the responses to the final writing project for the course, a take-home essay examination that read:

> Read the article "Colleges Reorient Freshman Orientation to Focus Attention on Society's Problems." Notice that Brandeis University assigned its incoming freshmen to read two books on urban life and the underclass over the summer.
>
> In an essay: 1. Design projects for an orientation course that would include George Orwell's book Down and Out in Paris and London. Include a discussion of the focus and purpose of the course. As part of this question: 2. argue for the effectiveness of this novel to such an orientation program. Consider whether Orwell's book is applicable to American society in the late twentieth century. Justify the

use of this book in the course.

Writing on this question, students revealed themselves to be thoroughly colonialist, unable to cross borders and speak for those who are traditionally excluded and silent. Although they were sincere in their desire to apply what they had learned from Orwell and to help others, many demonstrated a complete alienation from what came to seem like "urban issues"--other peoples' problems. Their own difference from urban victims was always maintained. Although one student approached an understanding of his own central-Wisconsin insularity by challenging his readers with the rhetorical question "do you ever do anything to help," he quickly backed away from critical reflection. He answered his question:

> Chances are probably not. Why don't we do anything. Because through today's education we are constantly taught that only the strong survive and the weak pass on. We view these people as the weak, and we watch them go by.

On one hand, Matt's use of the second person "you" indicates empathy for the homeless; on the other hand, it is more probable that he has resigned himself to being a member of a dominant group that is ineffectual in its attempts to deal with contemporary societal problems. Almost instantaneously Matt returns to using the first person "we." He avoids writing "<u>you</u> view these people as the weak," preferring instead "<u>we</u> view these people as the weak." And he reverts to the comfortable spectator's position in his last sentence when he notes that "we

watch them go by," a statement that seems congruent with his earlier assertion that his knowledge of the homeless was gained from photographs.

This particularly startling impulse to be a spectator amidst the challenges of life was even more pronounced in other students' essays. Their inability to envision solutions often manifested itself in blatantly passive proposals. Tammy, for instance, thought that if people could be diverted by homelessness, they might respond more positively and actively to significantly issues:

> People don't like to read statistics, they like to read for entertainment, and in putting these realities into an enjoyable novel, people are more likely to want to read it.

In Tammy's conception, reading is enough. She concludes that "making people aware of these problems is the only way we will be able to make any changes." Tammy's comments and Matt's awareness of his lack of critical education attest to the need for teachers to devise structured, critical discussions that, in Henry Giroux's words, allow "students to creatively appropriate the past as part of a living dialogue" and envision "more democratic forms of public life" (76). Teachers must take responsibility, he continues, for the knowledge they organize and produce (175). The students were distanced physically and in social class and experience from where they envisioned the real problems to occur. Unemployment, homelessness, and poverty were not addressed as problems that could occur anywhere, rather they were isolated in

a world apart, in "big cities." Tricia noted for example, that "Harlem, the South-side of Chicago and even inner-city Milwaukee are all good examples" of places where the unemployed roam the streets. Tricia does not recognize that the connection between unemployment and homelessness is not firm or equivocal. Furthermore, she implies that the unemployed and homeless announce themselves through prominent visual cues: perhaps the moth-eaten coats and bent postures of the television poor.

Possible social action is addressed in the essays with familiar terms drawn from middle-class culture and everyday educational experience. In designing projects for the orientation, only two students suggested that incoming students be required to spend one day working at a shelter for the homeless. More often students wrote of "tours" and "field trips" and "assignments." For instance, Jackie hoped that Orwell's Down and Out would expose new university students to:

> the problems which society faces, including poverty. Assignments for the incoming freshmen may be to tour or spend a night in an impoverished area to experience how the people live.

Her suggestion raises the image of a caravan of air-conditioned busses manoeuvering narrow urban streets. Students, reclining in padded seats, might choose to look at the sprawling urban scene as they sip on their Mountain Dew or they might turn away; either way, they maintain their distinction as spectators behind the dark glass of the bus windows. Oddly, Jackie reinforces her

proposal with the argument that this tour would make the students "action" oriented.

Jess's proposal offered a similar activity, a field trip to an impoverished area where students could witness the extent of urban disenfranchisement. He repeats the verb "to see" six times in this short paragraph:

> Another assignment would be to actually go to a big city on a field trip. If this wasn't possible, then movies or TV specials would do the job. But if this was possible, we would go through the slums of a smaller city (Madison) and see what was going on. The big difference between this and a book or TV is that it is real. The students would be able to see through their own eyes and not that of a camera. They would see the people that live in boxes or nothing at [all]. As they passed by, the students could see how people earn money on the street. It can be quite shocking to see a person begging or dancing for money on the street. George Orwell's book tells about these things but it's not the same as seeing it in person.
>
> Now, if that is impossible then a few movies would have to do. During those movies I would stress the fact that these are real people.

Note that Jess felt obligated to offer what he saw as an appropriate substitute for the field trip: television. He seems to recognize that the spectator in front of the television is not really much different from the spectator on the tour bus, but he

is compelled to exclaim that there is a difference: one experience is "real." Culture (high, low, commercial, everyday) here is something to be consumed. It makes little difference whether that culture is distressing, impoverished, or "real."

Much of what these students wrote might be easy to consign to youth and inexperience if it were not for the fact that two years earlier the Milwaukee Journal featured "a day in the central city" in its Sunday edition. The story was part photo essay and part diary, chronicling a day that lasted, as the subtitle noted, "from the first cup of coffee to the end of the last shift." Predominantly, the story was designed to erase difference, to ameliorate the conception that the center city was a place where one found the rather obvious signs of hopelessness: decaying front porches and threadbare street people pushing twisted shopping carts filled with trash bags. Rather the Journal intended to illustrate that the residents of the center city were "like people in any other part of Milwaukee": "They work, raise children, socialize and try to make a difference in their communities" (A1). Yet the feature itself works on the reader in much the same way as the students' essays in Modern British Literature. Like Jess, the Journal stresses that residents of the inner city are real people, and, like Jess and Jackie, the Journal asks readers, essentially, to take a tour of the inner city, to combine the familiar and the exotic, the same with the different. Ironically, it is a tour that can be completed at the breakfast table, without discomfiture.

It is clear that the problems with the responses to the question about Orwell's Down and Out were embedded in the course itself, in its aims, in its combination of works, in the final examination question, in its trajectory: what began as a course in intellectual spectatorship--the appreciation of literature--ended with a call for social action, a call that remained impotent because the structures for response were not implanted during discussions of the works on the reading list.

There is a way to unite the poetical and political pedagogical aims that surfaced in this general education literature course. The two can be contrasted in a study of the creation of British identity. Nationalistic, patriotic material ranging from film to text and including images of the beautiful, the past, and the monarchy, might be opposed to works that treat the social realities of the dole, IRA bombings, and the decline of the British economy after World War II. Literature can be set into this theme of social and representational critique. The teacher still accomplishes the primary aim of teaching literature, but the teacher also provides a wider social context and encourages students to think carefully about the social structures that engender literary production and about the ways they are manipulated as readers of literature. Such a method exposes the relationship between the appreciative approach to literature (which asks us to operate under the assumptions of national mythologies while we read) and the more aggressive, interventionist stance of cultural criticism.

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